SPORT

'Key time for testers as Winter Olympics approach'

LONDON: The Milano Cortina Winter Olympics are still three months away but now is a key time in the battle to keep the dopers out, WADA director of intelligence and investigations Guenter Younger said on Thursday.

The Games in Italy run from Feb 6-22, with many winter sports yet to get going.

"Every doper who is intelligent knows that he gets tested [at the Games], so every doper would stop at one stage [before then]," the German told Reuters at a World Anti-Doping Agency media briefing.

"So therefore now it's the best time to check them, and I'm sure that our colleagues test those that are suspicious more frequently than others. For us now it's the most important time."

Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva, the big doping story from the 2022 Beijing Winter Games, tested positive for the banned substance trimetazidine at the Russian national championships in December 2021.

Younger said whistleblowers remained a key element of the battle but there was no notable increase in the number of people getting in touch before an Olympics.

"If there is something related to the Games, then of course we are more alerted and we prioritise them more and we are in contact with the respective sports federation," he added.

"We need the guidance, to find the needle in the haystack. It's always complicated if you don't know where to look. If you know where to look it's much easier."

Younger also confirmed that WADA was looking into a leak about the investigation into 23 Chinese swimmers cleared of doping ahead of the Tokyo Games that took place in 2021 but denied "chasing the whistleblower".

He said 'Operation Puncture' had been set up to understand what happened, the motivation for leaking information, and how to strengthen the process. —Reuters

Hamza, Ahtesham win doubles title

ISLAMABAD: Hamza Roman and Ahtesham Humayun bagged the boys' doubles title of the ITF Pakistan Ali Embroidery World Junior Tennis Championship J-30 (Leg-2) here at the PTF-SDA Tennis Complex on Friday.

Hamza and Ahtesham beat compatriots Zohaib Afzal Malik and Abubakr Talha 7-6(6), 6-2 to clinch the title.

In the girls doubles final, the Kazakh pair of Polina and Karolina Ligai beat Turks Deniz Cakil and Ecrin Lal 6-3, 2-6, 10-8.—Sports Reporter

Finalists decided

LAHORE: FG/Din and SQ Seagold/Newage will clash in the final of the Jinnah Legacy Polo Cup after winning their last-four clashes by exactly the same scoreline at the Jinnah Polo Club here on Friday.

Both teams also had five-goal heroes in their respective 9-7 victories with Hamza Mawaz Khan leading the charge for FG/Din against Master Paints, while Saqib Khan Khakwani saw SQ Seagold/Newage triumph over Rijas/Master Paints/IS.—Sports Reporter

CANADA'S Felix Auger Aliassime in action during his Paris Masters quarter-final against Valentin Vacherot of Monaco at the Paris La Defense Arena on Friday.—Reuters

Bublik sets up Auger-Aliassime semi-final in Paris

PARIS: Alexander Bublik battled back to defeat Alex de Minaur on Friday and reach the first Masters 1000 semi-final of his career in Paris.

The Kazakh, enjoying his best-ever year, edged a dramatic contest 6-7(5/7), 6-4, 7-5 to set up a last-four meeting with Felix Auger-Aliassime, who earlier saw off Valentin Vacherot in his quarter-final.

Bublik is still in the race to qualify for next month's ATP Finals in Turin, competing for the eighth and last berth with Lorenzo Musetti, Auger-Aliassime and Daniil Medvedev.

The 28-year-old, who has won four ATP titles this season, also staged a comeback from two sets down against De Minaur at Roland Garros earlier this year en route to the French Open quarter-finals.

He pulled off a similar trick in the French capital Friday and will be full of confidence before facing Auger-Aliassime on Saturday.

Australian sixth seed De Minaur edged a tight first set which stayed on serve by reeling off four straight points to recover from 5-3 down in the tie-break.

Bublik hit back, though, grabbing the first break of the match in the third game of the second set to help force a decider.

He saw two break points come and go in the ninth game of the third set, but managed to seal the crucial break in De Minaur's next service game and calmly closed out victory.

Earlier, Auger-Aliassime cruised past Vacherot to keep his hopes of qualifying for the Finals alive.

The Canadian had come from a set down in all three of his previous matches at the La Defense Arena but eased past surprise Shanghai Masters champion Vacherot 6-2, 6-2.

Auger-Aliassime, targeting his second Masters 1000 final appearance, holds a 3-2 winning head-to-head record over Bublik.

"He (Vacherot) is so confident and you are kind of scared to be honest," Auger-Aliassime said.

"You are not sure if he has got some magic right now that nobody else has but he is playing unbelievably.

"I had to be so focused from the start and this level of intensity from the first game I brought helped ease me into the match and I played some good tennis."

Vacherot's remarkable run of 10 successive wins in Masters events came to an end. He won the Shanghai tournament earlier this month as a 204th-ranked qualifier.

The Monegasque is still set to break into the world's top 30 after another impressive performance in Paris as a wildcard.

Auger-Aliassime broke in a marathon opening game and went on to dominate the rest of the first set.

Vacherot appeared to be finding his feet early in the second set, but was broken twice in as many service games and slipped 5-2 behind.

He managed to bring up two break points, his first of the match, in the next game, but Auger-Aliassime saved both before successfully holding to finish the job.

On Thursday, Jannik Sinner eased past Francisco Cerundolo 7-5, 6-1 while reigning champion Alexander Zverev earned a straight-sets win over Alejandro Davidovich Fokina in the third round.

A maiden crown in the French capital will return Sinner to number one in the world rankings after current incumbent Carlos Alcaraz suffered a shock early exit at the hands of Britain's Cameron Norrie.

The Italian four-time Grand Slam champion is yet to drop a set in the tournament as he hones in on what would be a fifth title of the season.—AFP

Pakistani snooker stars carry a nation's hope and system's weight

By Ahmed Ali

KARACHI: In the hushed, hallowed hall of the Jahangir Khan Sports Club, the only sounds were the soft tread of shoes, the gentle tap of cue tips and the definitive clack of coloured balls colliding. This is the sound of a dream. A dream shared by five Pakistani cueists preparing for a ten-day battle at the IBSF World Snooker Championship in Doha, Qatar.

But for every hour of perfect practice on the green felt, there's a stark reality looming just outside the club's doors — a battle for recognition, for funding and for the very survival of their sport.

The squad is a blend of seasoned wisdom and youthful fire.

Current national champion Shahid Aftab and Mohammad Sajjad will grind through the qualifying rounds (last-64) which starts on November 3.

Meanwhile, IBSF champion Mohammad Asif, reigning Under-17 world champion Mohammad Hasnain Akhtar and Asjad Iqbal carry the nation's hopes directly into the last-48 stage which starts on November 8, thanks to their superior ranking.

For Shahid, a man who has dedicated nearly 25 years of his life to the sport, the fire still burns bright.

"I have set the goal of winning the tournament," Shahid told *Dawn*, his ambition undimmed by time. He speaks of the sport with a lover's passion. "This sport is my love, I think I'm nothing without it."

Yet, his perspective is shaped by a career of ups and downs. He acknowledged the fierce competition at home.

"To win in our national circuit is a considerable feat... It's very difficult to win consistently here," the 43-year-old noted.

He's also a bridge between eras, looking with pride at players like Hasnain.

"The young players play as good as me," Shahid said, recalling that their weren't any junior-level tournaments when he started his career. "The facilities today's generation have, we never had them."

That new generation is embodied by Hasnain. The young champion was buzzing with excitement.

"I am really looking forward to again compete on the world stage," the 16-year-old from Karachi told *Dawn*.

His previous world title victory earlier this year, a comfortable win over Wales' Riley Powell, injected him with a surge of confidence. Training now with veterans like Shahid and Sajjad provides a "significant boost" he didn't have before.

For Hasnain, it's about more than just trophies. Recalling his past win, he said: "It was a proud moment for me and my family that I won a title for my country."

His goal is to bring that title home once more, but his mindset revealed maturity beyond his years.

"I always try to learn from my experience be it winning or losing... even if I lose I hope to learn something that will help me become a better player."

THE DIRE REALITY

This tale of sporting excellence, however, is underpinned by a story of staggering financial neglect.

Naveed Kapadia, secretary of the Pakistan Billiards and Snooker Federation (PBSA), didn't mince words.

"The financial situation of the federation is dire," he revealed while talking to *Dawn*.

The numbers are a gut punch. For the financial year 2024-25, the Pakistan Sports Board (PSB) granted the PBSA a mere Rs1 million.

"The expenses for international trips alone were Rs9 million," Naveed told.

To send this team to Qatar, the federation has had to resort to desperate measures.

"We have taken some loans while some players have contributed for the time being," Naveed admitted. "They will be reimbursed later. This has been done in the past too."

The cold shoulder from the authorities is even more chilling. Naveed highlights a broken promise.

PSB initially announced a Rs5 million reward for a world gold medallist, only to later slash it to Rs1.5 million specifically for snooker, while other 42 sports got Rs3 million.

Asif won the Masters title in Bahrain this year while Hasnain clinched the U-17 title in the same year.

When he questioned this to the PSB officials, the response was dismissive: snooker has too many tournaments.

Naveed's reply is one of pure logic and frustration.

"Every player is participating in a different age group so how can we reduce the number of tournaments?"

So, as these four players pack their cues for Doha, they carry more than just their equipment. They carry the legacy of a sport loved in obscurity, the hopes of a next generation and the weight of a system that offers little more than empty promises.

Hasnain bags first five-wicket haul, Faham smashes maiden ton

LAHORE: The second day of the fifth round of the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy saw Sialkot pacer Mohammad Hasnain and Faisalabad opening batter Faham-ul-Haq register memorable career milestones in first-class cricket as exciting action unfolded across the five venues in four cities.

Abbottabad were made to follow-on by Sialkot as they faltered in their first innings getting bowled out for 92 in 34.5 overs from being 51-2, incurring a 293-run first innings deficit at the Diamond Cricket Ground, Islamabad on Friday. In their second dig, Abbottabad were 37-1 when stumps were drawn.

Hasnain returned figures of 5-22 — besting his previous haul of 4-42 — while he was supported in Abbottabad's annihilation by Hasan Ali (3-14) and Mohammad Ali (2-27).

Earlier, Shahnawaz Dahani's fourth first-class five-wicket haul (5-86) and Israr Hussain's 4-117 helped Abbottabad wrap up Sialkot's first innings for 385 after they resumed from overnight score of 322-4.

Faham registered his maiden first-class century (137 not out) to bring his team closer to parity with Peshawar's 320-run first innings total as they finished the day at 309-7 at the Shoaib Akhtar Cricket Stadium in Rawalpindi.

At the Abbottabad Cricket Stadium, Fata finished the day with 213-7 — with another 219 runs in arrears — in reply to Islamabad's 432 all out in the first innings. Islamabad's Hunain Shah (4-69) and Musa Khan (2-44) were among the wickets. Fata's Rehan Afridi made 71 not out. Earlier in the day, Islamabad's Sarmad Bhatti remained unbeaten on 150 while Rohail Nazir made 101.

Islamabad, who were 326-4 at stumps on the opening day, were dismissed for 432 as Fata pace trio of Akif Javed (4-121), Arshadullah (3-109) and Sameen Gul (2-83) bagged nine wickets.

A total of 16 wickets fell at the Imran Khan Stadium in Peshawar in the fixture between Karachi Blues and Bahawalpur as the latter ended day two with 35-1 in pursuit of a 213-run target.

Bahawalpur resumed their first innings from overnight score of 55-5 before being skittled for 115 as Saqib Khan (4-42), Muhammad Umar (3-34) and Mohammad Hamza (2-28) gave Karachi a 102-run lead. In the second innings, Omair Bin Yousuf made 76 as Karachi Blues slumped to 49-7 before being bowled out for 110. Gulfam Aziz took three wickets.

Multan gained a three-run second-innings lead after they ended the day with 122-3 against Lahore Whites at the Marghzar Cricket Ground in Islamabad. Facing a 119-run first innings deficit, Multan's Waqar Hussain (49) and Imran Butt (38) stitched a 69-run second-wicket stand before Mohammad Abbas removed the former.

Earlier, Lahore Whites were bowled out for 283 as they resumed from their overnight score of 121-4. Mohammad Ismail picked up three wickets.

Lahore Whites' gained a substantial first-innings lead as Qasim Akram struck 61 while Aamir Jamal (45), Nisar Ahmed (33) and Mohammad Abbas (22) frustrated the Multan bowlers after their team had slipped to 172-7.—Agencies

PFB ExCo backs Fakhar after PSB ban

LAHORE: The Executive Committee of the Pakistan Federation Baseball has decided to support its secretary general Syed Fakhar Shah against the ban imposed on him by the Pakistan Sports Board last week.

In an emergent meeting, Fakhar was also congratulated for being elected as president of the South Asian Baseball Federation in elections held Thailand earlier this month.

The PSB had banned Fakhar for not seeking a No-Objection Certificate from it before sending a team to China. Fakhar had replied to the allegation that participation of the national under-15 team in an Asian event was necessary and the time was short to seek NOC from the PSB.

"Syed Fakhar Ali Shah will continue to hold the post of Secretary General of Pakistan Federation Baseball as no ban has been imposed by the Federation or the Pakistan Olympic Association," PFB chairman Shaukat Javed was quoted as saying in a news release on Friday. "He will appeal against the PSB decision and the PFB will file a separate appeal."

The House unanimously approved that PFB elections will be held later this year in accordance with the sports policy of the PSB and under the guidance of the POA during the next General Council meeting.

"During this time, on behalf of the federation, Dr. Muhammad Hamood Lakhvi, Senior Vice President, will be authorised to communicate and correspond with all the affiliated units of PFB within Pakistan and all affiliated units of the Pakistan Sports Board."—Sports Reporter

DAKAR: International Olympic Committee President Kirsty Coventry (L) and Senegal President Bassirou Diomaye Faye (second R) pose along with Ayo, the official mascot for the Dakar 2026 Youth Olympics Games, during its unveiling ceremony at the Grand Theater on Friday. Senegal will be the first African country to host the Summer Youth Olympic Games next year.—AFP

Sadia ousts Sana in dramatic clash at CNS Squash

By Anushe Engineer

KARACHI: A seemingly normal quarter-final at the CNS Squash Championships turned into a literal battleground as throat jabs and body slams took centrestage between two women vying for a spot in the semi-finals on Friday morning.

What started off as a regular game in Karachi between top seed Sana Bahadar and former Pakistan number one Sadia Gul turned into rough play during the fourth game as an injured Sana — leading 7/11, 15/13, 11/6 — asked the referee to stop play and pointed to her throat before exiting the court.

It wasn't till she communicated to her father that the referee and audience knew what had happened — she had been elbowed in the throat and was struggling to breathe. Sana, who is entirely deaf and mute, relies on her father as her primary translator to communicate her thoughts to the rest of the world.

The duo had already stumbled over each other's shoes and rackets throughout the match and protested to the referee, mostly in vain, as they briefly nursed their injuries and got back to the game.

After being attended to by a medical staff and given a three-minute break to recover, Sana gave a thumbs-up to the referee and re-entered the court. The 19-year-old seemed to have lost her mojo as she struggled to pick up points and ultimately lost the fourth game 5/11 to Sadia, who is currently Pakistan's only female squash coach.

With two wins each, an already tense fifth set witnessed drama unfold as both players appealed to the referee for a let on multiple occasions. Sadia was chastising herself out loud — "Sadia come on, you need to focus" — as Sana clawed her way back and equalised the score 10-10 to applause from the sparse audience.

At 11-11, Sadia lunged into the court's glass wall seemingly after tripping on court. One point later, she stumbled several steps backwards and hit her head against the wall before slumping to the floor. Sana went to pick up her racket and then lent her a hand to pull her up. Sana almost won the match at 14-13 before Sadia took a point, Sana appearing visibly frustrated with herself.

Ultimately, Sadia took the game 16-14 to secure her place in Saturday's semi-final. The two hugged on court and Sana gestured her thanks to the referee — clapping her hand against her racket — before heading over to her brother and father, Sher Bahadar.

It was while she was cooling down that Sher approached Sadia, congratulated her on the win, and then accused her of unsportsmanlike conduct during the game. Sadia turned to the referee and protested Sher approaching her, but the referee stayed silent, even as he accused the referee of deliberately causing Sana to lose.

Speaking to *Dawn* after the match, Sher lamented Sadia "constantly shoving Sana throughout the game, which is against PSA [Professional Squash Association] rules.

"If this happened at a game being played abroad, the player would have been given a warning the first time, and then the opponent would have been handed the match win," Sher said. He has reached out to PSA requesting that they record and livestream matches so that they can independently analyse "wrongdoings" in games like these.

"Sadia is an experienced player, a coach and now a mother; these kinds of antics from her were unprofessional," he said.

The remaining quarterfinals unfolded without turmoil. Mahnoor Ali breezed through to the semis with a 3-0 win over Zunaira Imran (11-0, 11,3, 11-2) while Mahnoor's sister Sehrish beat Rushna Mehboob in similar fashion (11/7, 11/4, 11/5). Mariam Malik defeated her younger sister Amna 3-1 (11/7, 11/7, 9/11, 11/6)

On the men's side, Nasir Iqbal raced into the semis with a 11/4, 11/1/11/3 victory over Saddam-ul-Haq while Tayyab Aslam cruised past Mohammad Zaman 11/8, 11/4, 11/2. Ammad Gul also advanced without losing a game, defeating Israr Ahmed 11/7, 12/10, 11/4. In the last quarterfinal, Anas Ali Shah came back from a game down to beat Abdullah Nawaz 9/11, 11/3, 11/8, 11/3.